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# Presidential Address: Visions and Revisions: The View from the Presidents' Offices of Ontario Universities Since the Second World War

H. Blair Neatby

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### Résumé de l'article

Depuis les années 1940 les universités de l'Ontario se sont transformées. Les recteurs ont joué un rôle décisif en déterminant ces changements. Pendant les années 50 ils ont défendu l'idée de l'université comme centre pour l'étude des arts libéraux, en partie parce que les autres options leur semblaient trop risquées.

Pendant les années 60 le rôle du gouvernement était de donner de l'argent. Les recteurs, à titre collectif et individuel, répondaient aux demandes du gouvernement, des professeurs et des étudiants. Durant les années 60 les universités s'ajustèrent à la croissance, à un rééquilibrage entre l'enseignement et la recherche, et à un nouveau système provincial — tout cela sans la moindre crise ou l'inévitable conflit de personnalité. Depuis les années 70 la politique gouvernementale de restriction budgétaire domine les discussions entre le gouvernement et les universités. À cela se rattachent les débats sur les sujets d'accessibilité et les recherches pour le secteur privé. Les recteurs n'ont pas encore défini de nouveaux objectifs qui seraient réalistes aux yeux du gouvernement.

## **PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

### **Visions and Revisions: The View from the Presidents' Offices of Ontario Universities Since the Second World War**

**H. BLAIR NEATBY**

#### ***Résumé***

*Ontario universities have been transformed since the 1940s. University presidents have played a crucial role in shaping these changes. In the 1950s they defended the concept of the liberal arts college, partly because other options seemed too risky.*

*In the 1960s the government provided the finances and the presidents, separately and jointly, responded to the diverse demands of governments, faculties, and students. By the 1970s, the institutions had adapted to expansion, to a shift in balance between teaching and research, and to an emerging provincial system without any major crises or characters. Since the 1970s the government's policy of financial constraint has dominated discussions, with related debates on accessibility and private sector research. The university presidents have not yet defined new goals which the government considers realistic.*

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In an ideal world the presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association would reflect the interests of all of its members. Our membership, however, is not confined to academic historians. We have public historians, private historians, aspiring historians, and retired historians, to say nothing of the plethora of specialisations. But the president's address is also expected to be a scholarly performance, with new insights drawn from meticulous research and with the footnotes to prove it. It is not easy to be a generalist and a specialist in the same breath. One such *tour de force* in a lifetime is the best we can hope for, and this doubtless explains why we elect a new president each year.

I can at least argue that my topic should be of general interest to this audience. The university as an institution has some relevance to all of us. It trains historians, certifies them with its degrees, employs some of them, supports historical research, and helps to adjudicate scholarly standards. Any major changes in the institution affect our profession. And over the last forty years universities have been radically transformed. Back in the 1950s, in English-language universities at least, a BA in history meant some exposure to English, to mathematics and science, to a social science, and to a second language. Those were the years when university presidents actually presided over their institutions, and heads of history departments were more than figureheads — and they ruled until old age retired them. History professors enjoyed genteel poverty and did research almost as a hobby; certainly the university gave them little help. I plan to discuss how the universities of that era evolved into the universities we are familiar with today and, more specifically, the role of the university presidents in that evolution.

The pressures for change came from many directions. The faculty formed associations and even unions to increase their influence and their rewards, and have contributed to the shift in emphasis from teaching to research. Students challenged the structured programmes in favour of the freer choice of the credit system. Governments also shaped the institutions with munificent capital endowments and operating grants in the 1960s, and then with sharp reminders that these funds had strings attached. Neither faculty nor students nor politicians succeeded in getting the kind of institution they wanted.

University presidents played a crucial role in reshaping the universities. They saw themselves as the spokesmen for the institutions, balancing the interests of the government and the public on the one hand and the faculty and students on the other. Presidents, to do their job, were constantly stressing the facets or functions of universities which seemed most popular. Universities were becoming such complex institutions that the presidents had some choice; success depended upon stressing that aspect of university activity which all groups could support. When conditions changed, so too did the focus of presidential pronouncements.

My illustrations will be drawn from Ontario universities. One of the major developments in higher education since the war has been the integration of universities into provincial systems. I have chosen the provincial system of Ontario because I had to start somewhere and because I live in Ontario. The pattern in other provinces is not identical. I do assume however that what has happened in Ontario bears some resemblance to what has happened elsewhere. If I am wrong it shows that I have lived in Ontario too long.

In my research I have used the presidents' public speeches and their annual reports. I have also had access to the files of what began in 1962 as the Committee of Presidents of Provincially Assisted Universities and Colleges of Ontario and in 1971 became the Council of Ontario Universities, and to the files of the Advisory Council of University Affairs, a council appointed by the government to advise on policy in higher education. These sources do not tell us what the universities were like. They do, however, tell us what the presidents thought universities were like or what they ought to be like. What is fascinating is how often and how radically their rhetoric on the nature and role of the university was revised.

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Dans cette communication je m'en tiendrai uniquement à la transformation de l'enseignement supérieur en Ontario, tout en reconnaissant que l'enseignement au Québec a aussi subi une transformation — une transformation plus radicale même, lors de la création des CEGEPs. Mais l'Ontario et le Québec ont essayé de résoudre les mêmes questions: quels sont les objectifs, qui doit faire la planification, qui doit payer la note. Je chercherai à démontrer qu'en Ontario les présidents (ou recteurs) des universités ont joué un rôle central dans cette transformation. Dans les années cinquante ils défendront les études traditionnelles du "liberal arts college" tout en étant déjà sur la défensive. Ils tenteront de résister aux changements que la croissance des inscriptions et la spécialisation laissent prévoir.

If we go back to the 1950s, for example, we find ourselves in another world. Ontario university presidents in those days extolled a nostalgic view of a higher education in which a community of scholars transmitted Christian or middle-class values to the leaders of the next generation. In those years before liberation theology any distinctions between Christian and middle-class values somehow seemed unimportant. It was not that the presidents were unaware of social pressures or insensitive to the changes which were already taking place. Yet they saw most of the changes as threatening and disruptive, and who could blame them? With the financial resources they could count on — student fees, private philanthropy and, for the provincially supported institutions, niggardly grants to cover operating deficits — it would have been irresponsible for them to do anything but resist expansion, or specialisation, or more research. They appealed to the traditions of the liberal arts college because they believed their institutions could teach the liberal arts and teach them well, but they also called for preserving the traditional patterns because it was all they could afford.

Enrolment was one of the major concerns of the decade. The end of World War II had brought the veterans and had doubled the prewar enrolment. But this was seen as a temporary emergency, financed in part by special federal grants. Enrolment did decline as the veterans graduated but it did not go back to the prewar levels. Federal grants to universities from 1951 eased the pressures slightly. Then in 1955 Edward Sheffield of the Dominion Bureau of Statistics told the National Conference of Canadian Universities that, based on demography and increased participation, especially of women, enrolment would double over the next decade.

We may speculate that some of the presidents had little sympathy for the egalitarian sentiments and economic aspirations which favoured more open admissions policies. Colleges had once been attended by the sons (and sometimes the daughters) of the gentry, and their cultural mission might be threatened if lower-class students were too numerous to be assimilated. George P. Gilmour, president of McMaster, warned in 1954 that, with universal education,

a new problem has emerged, because a greater proportion of students now come to university from homes which do not naturally and continually prepare their children for university, homes where books are scarce, where taste is not severely disciplined, and where education is looked on chiefly as a means of upgrading in the economic sense.

These lower-class students, not surprisingly, posed some problems. As Gilmour went on to explain, "some of them even have to be urged to shave daily and to wear clean linen and polished shoes. Male dress often leaves much to be desired, and table manners lack nicety."<sup>1</sup>

George Gilmour may seem ridiculous today; in his day he was probably more outspoken but many of his fellow presidents may well have agreed with him in private. Certainly all of them at one time or another expressed their concern that increased enrolment might destroy what their institution stood for, and announced an upper limit to the number to be admitted to their institution. The ceilings were always higher than the actual enrolment of that year, and miraculously rose so as not to interfere with enrolment as the years went by, but we are dealing with rhetoric, not policy. The ceilings, however inflatable, are evidence of the presidents' reluctance to accept increased participation, one of the major changes in higher education in our time.

The so-called Plateau Committee of the University of Toronto, with President Sidney Smith as a member, illustrates the reluctance to admit the implications of increased enrolment even after the pressure for expansion could no longer be resisted. Enrolment at the University of Toronto in 1955 was about twelve thousand full-time students. The Plateau Committee, appointed in that year, was responding to Sheffield's statistics and also to the responsibilities and interests of the University of Toronto which saw itself as the provincial university. It proposed a maximum of twenty-four thousand. But the regret is unmistakable:

even this [increase] is to be avoided if at all possible but it is doubtful if new institutions can be developed in sufficient time to avoid this contingency. It cannot be stressed too emphatically, however, that the groundwork must be laid now for new institutions to ensure that we reach a plateau when the University reaches the 24,000 mark.

What is even more revealing is the implicit assumption that the nature of the university would not be affected by this doubling in size. Professors and colleges and students would be added proportionately as the student body grew. Nobody suggested that a larger university might mean a shift in emphasis to graduate studies and research

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1. G.P. Gilmour, *The University and its Neighbours* (Toronto, 1954), 54-57.

or to more specialized professional faculties. Even with more students, higher education was to be more of the same.<sup>2</sup>

The place of professional schools within the university was a potentially disruptive issue. At the University of Toronto, Sidney Smith warned that “the ever increasing list of professional schools in many universities should be regarded as a danger signal.” Universities should not devalue the academic currency by occupational certification and, in any case, these schools would only drain funds away from the meagre financial resources available for the faculties of Arts. Presidents “should beware of the camels that seek from time to time to edge into our academic tents.”<sup>3</sup>

Those of us who are innately suspicious of Toronto might wonder whether this was intended to dissuade others from duplicating professional faculties already established at Toronto. This would be unfair to Sidney Smith. He was consistent in his championship of the University of Toronto as primarily an undergraduate institution. He was equally suspicious of the temptations of research. The natural scientists already saw research as an integral part of their academic activity, and the National Research Council provided some funds for graduate studies. Research, however, was still seen as peripheral to the central activity of the university. As late as 1955, the University of Toronto was described as “primarily an undergraduate institution to which a small graduate program was attached.”<sup>4</sup> Even this could be seen as the thin edge of the wedge. Smith was disturbed to find “in interviewing prospective staff members a reluctance to place the teaching duties ahead of the research opportunities” and he warned his presidential colleagues that they must be ever vigilant because “Teaching is the primary responsibility and good teachers are the most urgent need.”<sup>5</sup>

But what could be done about the pressures of enrolment, of professionalisation, and of research? The answer was an almost plaintive appeal to the liberal-arts tradition. If humanists, social scientists, and scientists would only emphasize their common humanity the community of scholars could be preserved, and the universities would survive unscathed. George Gilmour thundered against the internal divisions like an Old Testament prophet. “Today,” he warned in 1954, “we go in fear of the stranger that is within our gates, who turns out on closer examination to be our colleagues, whose book we do not read and whose vocabularies we do not comprehend.”<sup>6</sup> Sidney Smith was less apocalyptic but shared the same concern. “What is wanted,” he argued, “is not so much a multiplicity of courses as a number of courses taught philosophically by a staff who are able to see the interrelation and to perceive philosophic unity.”<sup>7</sup>

It is striking that, whatever their differences, none of the presidents of the 1950s openly welcomed the signs of change. Faced with limited revenues, and torn between

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2. Robin Ross, *The Short Road Down: A University Changes* (Toronto, 1984), 13-14.
  3. National Conference of Canadian Universities, *Proceedings* (1950), 34-37.
  4. SSHRC, *Report of the Commission on Graduate Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, August 1978, 1: 43.
  5. NCCUC, *Proceedings* (1950), 8, 19.
  6. C.M. Johnson, *McMaster University* (Toronto, 1976-80), II: 269.
  7. University of Toronto, *President's Report*, June 1952, 14.

conservative boards of governors on one hand and increasingly restive professors on the other, they tried to keep the peace by appealing to the values of the traditional liberal-arts college. Claude Bissell, in his presidential report for Carleton University in 1957, probably went to the heart of the matter when he insisted that "rapid expansion now would endanger the financial structure of the University."<sup>8</sup> The insistence that small was beautiful was the instinctive response of men who were responsible for the survival of their respective institutions and who saw the pressures for change as disruptive and potentially destructive.

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Nous verrons maintenant que, dans les années soixante, les recteurs des universités présideront à une transformation radicale des universités. Le gouvernement leur imposera l'expansion de leurs établissements pour rendre l'université accessible aux nombres accrus qui s'y présentent. Les recteurs devront se soumettre à cet ordonnance. L'expansion des universités entraînera une foule de changements: la valorisation du professorat, le prestige de la recherche par rapport à l'enseignement, de nouvelles instances décisionnelles dans la gouvernance de chaque établissement, les rapports de l'université avec le gouvernement. Cette transformation se fera paisiblement, sans drame, sans émeutes, sans grèves. Les recteurs en seront les médiateurs et non pas les architectes, mais même la médiation peut s'avérer constructive.

The universities we are familiar with bear little relation to the presidential generalities of the 1950s. The change came abruptly, in the early 1960s when suddenly, it seemed, big had become beautiful. The university presidents, instead of advocating limited enrolments and ceilings, were soon using the vocabulary of boosterism as they reported on more students, new programmes, and new buildings each year. Even denominational colleges "de-confessionalized," to use the Ontario euphemism, in order to become eligible for provincial grants and to join in the secular race to become multiversities. Full-time undergraduate enrolment in Ontario universities tripled during the decade, from less than seventeen thousand in 1960, to over fifty-four thousand in 1970.<sup>9</sup>

How are we to account for this change of heart? Critics who still favoured the liberal-arts college were inclined to suspect that the presidents were unprincipled entrepreneurs whose actions belied their words, and who had been seduced by the chance to escape the relative obscurity of a college to become the head of a bigger institution. Critics on the left, who wanted the presidents to spearhead social reform, were even more disdainful; we are now talking about the 1960s when any link with corporate capitalism or government was seen as a sell-out to the establishment. But it is not easy to reconcile the presidents of the 1960s with either of these descriptions. Claude

8. Carleton University, *President's Report*, 1956-57, 10.

9. Statistics Canada, *Historical Compendium of Education Statistics from Confederation to 1975* (Ottawa, 1978), Table 21.

Bissell at Toronto, Alex Corry at Queen's, Ed. Hall at Western, Davidson Dunton at Carleton, Murray Ross at York, Francis Leddy at Windsor: these men were humanists<sup>10</sup> who continued to worry about the growth of professional schools and the loss of personal contact with students. But as presidents they were committed to the welfare of their institutions, and in the 1960s the context of higher education had changed. It soon became clear that a university that did not expand would be penalized.

The strongest pressure came from the provincial government. In Ontario university funding under George Drew and Leslie Frost had followed informal but well-understood rules. There was no provincial support for denominational universities, although McMaster and the University of Ottawa could qualify for some funds for faculties which were considered secular. Institutions defined as nondenominational tried to balance their budgets from student fees, endowments, and small provincial grants. Each year they would submit their budget to the premier's office and, each year, the provincial government would give them enough to balance their operating budget. It was a cozy system in which the members of the legislature and the businessmen on the boards of governors trusted each other.

In the 1950s this informal system began to break down. Between 1957 and 1967 the number of provincially assisted universities, including former denominational colleges and new institutions, rose from six to fourteen.<sup>11</sup> At the same time the size of the requests was increasing and in some years the operating deficits were much higher than the universities had budgeted for.<sup>12</sup> In 1958 Leslie Frost established an advisory committee of public servants to give guidance to the government. In 1961 Premier John Robarts reorganized the Advisory Committee on University Affairs to include some prominent businessmen and, more important, the former premier Leslie Frost. For the next few years this committee advised the government on the financing of higher education and the government followed its advice.

The committee rejected retrenchment as a choice. Instead it opted for a policy of expansion. The decision had little to do with the importance of research and development or of highly qualified manpower in an increasingly competitive world. Leslie Frost was less concerned about advanced technology than he was about the political consequences if university classrooms had no seats for the students who would soon be graduating from high school. In 1961 he was convinced that an enrolment crisis was imminent and that something would have to be done.

The first step of the Advisory Committee on University Affairs was to interview each of the presidents of the provincially assisted universities to ask them how they could

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10. Dr. G.E. Hall's field was medical research but his interest in history may justify including him among the humanists. See J.R.W. Gwynne-Timothy, *Western's First Century* (London, 1978), 289.
  11. Robin S. Harris, *Quiet Evolution: A Study of the Educational System of Ontario* (Toronto, 1967), 26, Table I.
  12. In 1958, for example, the University of Toronto had an unexpected deficit of a million dollars. The provincial government covered half of this amount with the rest having to come from endowment funds.



help to meet this crisis. It was a typical of Frost, "Mr. Ontario," that he would turn to the existing local institutions and ask for their cooperation. Governments in Ontario prefer to govern indirectly. It was also typical of the presidents that at first they were very cautious. They all wanted to be helpful but they might need more land, and all of them would need more buildings and more professors before they could admit more students. Where would the money come from? The answer was quite unexpected. Frost assured them that the government would provide the money if a university submitted constructive proposals for expansion.

The presidents also learned quickly enough that there were strings attached to this offer. Alex Corry, for example, felt there were good reasons for caution at Queen's. As he explained to the advisory committee in January of 1962, Queen's might be able to handle forty-five hundred students on its existing site but any expansion beyond that would mean major expropriations or a second campus.<sup>13</sup> Since Queen's had just gone through a bitter confrontation with the Kingston city council over a previous expropriation, Corry hoped for special consideration.<sup>14</sup> A year later when Corry reappeared he faced a hostile committee. Queen's had raised its admission standards to restrict enrolment and Frost was not at all pleased. He did promise to meet the deficit forecast in the 1962-63 budget but warned that next year "we will talk it over after we see if you meet your projected 10% increase in enrolment."<sup>15</sup> Direct appeals from Corry to Frost had no effect.<sup>16</sup> Government grants were tied to expansion.

The presidents, even those of the provincially supported universities, still talked of autonomy. Whatever lexicographers may say, in Canada autonomy is a matter of degree, whether it is dominion, provincial, or university autonomy. The presidents did have an advantage, in that governments in Ontario prefer to coopt local leaders. Indeed, Leslie Frost suggested that the presidents should form an association in order to plan the emerging system collectively and to advise his committee. If they could agree as a group there was some assurance that the government would respect their views. But the limits to what the presidents referred to as "collective autonomy" were pointed out in 1966 in a speech by William Davis, then minister of Colleges and Universities.

There is, moreover, much evidence to indicate that provided the universities can meet the responsibilities of our times we should undoubtedly be better off if they were allowed to continue to operate with . . . autonomy. On the other hand, if they cannot or will not accept these responsibilities and if, for example, large numbers of able students must be turned away because the university is not prepared to accept them, or if, as another example, some of the less glamorous disciplines are ignored, despite pressing demands for graduates in those areas, or if costly duplication of effort is evident, I cannot imagine that any society, especially one bearing large expense for education, will want to stand

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13. Ontario. Archives, RG 32, MCU 143, box 42, ACUA minutes, 14 January 1962 (hereafter OA, ACUA minutes.)
  14. For the difficulties, see F.W. Gibson, *Queen's University* (Montreal, 1978-82), II: 382-90.
  15. AO, MCU, box 42, ACUA minutes (rough draft), 28 March 1963.
  16. *Ibid.*, Committee on University Affairs, box 3, "Queen's University," Corry to Frost, 8 January 1964.

idly by. For there will inevitable be a demand — there have been indications of this in other jurisdictions — that government will move in and take over.<sup>17</sup>

Even bland Bill Davis could be threatening on occasion.

If the presidents were to exercise some degree of autonomy it was vital that they be seen as the only spokesmen for the universities of the province. Professors threatened to challenge this monopoly, arguing that they, rather than the administration, were the real custodians of academic values. In 1962 the faculty associations in the province had formed the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations and claimed the right to appear before the advisory committee or the minister on the same terms as the Committee of Presidents. As Claude Bissell warned his fellow-presidents in 1964: "It has become increasingly difficult for the institutional heads to speak authoritatively for the whole academic community."<sup>18</sup> His concern eventually led to the addition of an academic colleague from each university to the Committee of Presidents. The presidents still dominated the new Council of Ontario Universities but they had forestalled the possibility of being narrowly identified with the administration, and could claim to speak for the university community.

The major achievement of the Committee of Presidents was the adoption of formula financing for operating grants. With more universities and larger budgets, neither presidents nor politicians were happy about the existing procedures in which the governments merely covered university deficits. To be strictly accountable to government officials for every item of expenditure would, however, be inconsistent with the presidents' views of autonomy. The solution was a weighted formula based on enrolment in undergraduate and graduate programmes. Enrolment statistics would determine the size of the provincial grant, and each university could then administer the funds as it saw fit. The government had a formula which would encourage university expansion and the presidents had retained some autonomy.

The formula was less objective than this suggests. Each university had a different proportion of students in pass arts, in honours, in professional faculties, or in doctoral programmes, and the weights assigned to each of these categories would determine each university's income. The presidents managed to agree, not by arriving at a consensus on an ideal formula but by choosing a formula which would come closest to duplicating the existing grants. The new universities, which had special financial problems, were placated by special additional grants. The presidents might well be pleased with their work. They had established financial arrangements which seemed to please everyone and still left them with considerable administrative autonomy.

The university presidents also managed to put some limits on the number of institutions offering higher education. They argued that new universities should be affiliated with established universities, thus giving them the benefit of a recognized

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17. William G. Davis, "The Government of Ontario and the Universities of the Province," *Governments and the University* (Toronto, 1966), 34.

18. COU 1/1, Claude Bissell, memorandum to CPOU, 9 March 1964.

degree and assuring high academic standards. The new universities were not convinced of the benefits. York University found the tutelage of the University of Toronto much too constraining, and newer institutions such as Brock and Trent were independent from the beginning. The presidents were more successful in shaping their relations with the new colleges of applied arts and technology. The ministry of Colleges and Universities appeared to favour the idea of community colleges offering first- and second-year university credits, an arrangement which would have the advantage of making the first years of university more accessible and less expensive. The Committee of Presidents, however, refused to offer university credits for courses offered at the new colleges.<sup>19</sup> The community colleges in Ontario thus became alternative institutions outside the university system. The presidents were no doubt sincere in their insistence on maintaining unimpeachable academic standards, but their position was also consistent with a desire to monopolize the public funds allocated to higher education.

There were areas, however, where the presidents were less effective. Their "collective autonomy" was sometimes less autonomous than they would have liked but it was sometimes less collective. The presidents had some common interests but they were also rivals. The Committee of Presidents was a voluntary association and no president was bound by any of its decisions. Each president's primary commitment was to his own institution and there were occasions when a president would go to the advisory council or even to the minister to express his disagreement with a recommendation from the Committee of Presidents. The collective will was often a myth.

The battles were often over the distribution of graduate and professional programmes. By the 1960s these often seemed essential to the welfare of a university; hence the competition. Increased enrolment meant hiring more professors. The reputation of the university would ultimately depend on the quality of its faculty. But American as well as Canadian universities were competing for professors. What inducements could the universities offer? They needed to be able to offer more money, and faculty salaries did rise sharply. But formula financing meant that salary levels across Ontario could not vary greatly. Ambitious professors could also be attracted by the possibility of teaching in their specialised fields, of attracting graduate students, and of having the facilities for research. Even a president deeply committed to the liberal arts could not ignore the changing market conditions. Graduate programmes and a greater emphasis on specialised research became almost a necessity.

Financial support for graduate studies was not the immediate problem. Graduate programmes in Ontario were badly needed to produce the professors which would be required. As early as 1962 the government set aside three million dollars for graduate studies in Ontario and asked the Committee of Presidents for advice on how to distribute the money. The presidents set up a committee with representatives from the universities with graduate programmes: Toronto, Queen's, Western, Ottawa, and McMaster. Not surprisingly, the committee proposed that the lion's share go to these institutions; 35 per cent to Toronto, 55 per cent to the other four, and the remaining

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19. For their arguments against junior colleges, see Committee of Presidents of Provincially Assisted Universities, *Post-Secondary Education in Ontario 1962-70* (Toronto, 1963).

10 per cent to Assumption, Carleton, Waterloo, and York. At the next meeting of the presidents there were some complaints. According to the minutes, "the Presidents of the older universities pointed out that the government was concerned above all with producing new staff quickly, and that a formula that favoured the more productive graduate schools would stand a better chance of being accepted."<sup>20</sup> The presidents of the younger universities might well fear that their interests had been overlooked. They were placated with the promise that their aspirations to develop graduate work would be taken into consideration in the future. The provincial funds were eventually put into Ontario government fellowships which allowed the students to choose the university they would attend.

But what kind of a choice would the students have? The need for planning at the provincial level was obvious; more graduate programmes were needed but how many, in what disciplines, and where? The Committee of Presidents could not agree collectively on answers to any of these questions and the government therefore appointed a commission to study the development of graduate programmes in Ontario universities. The Spinks report in 1966 was a bombshell. It recommended that graduate studies be brought under the umbrella of a University of Ontario. The presidents were unanimously opposed to the suggestion.<sup>21</sup> As an alternative they offered to evaluate any proposals for new graduate programmes. It proved to be an alternative with no teeth. The academic evaluators usually concluded that the proposed programmes were academically respectable. If there were criticisms the interested university almost invariably promised to take the necessary steps to strengthen the programme. The Committee of Presidents was not inclined to be difficult. "Collective autonomy" was achieved by allowing individual universities to manage their own affairs. In an era of expansion it was the path of least resistance.

The university presidents, however, had other problems which at times must have seemed more threatening than the possibility of government intervention or the difficulty of collective action. Their authority within their respective institutions was under attack. One challenge came from the faculty. The 1960s was an age of participatory democracy, and faculty members pressed their claims to participation in many ways, including membership on search committees for deans and even for presidents, or on promotions or budget committees. The increasing importance of research strengthened the claims of the faculty for greater autonomy because fundamental research was linked to academic freedom. In brief, the traditional distinctions between academic and administrative matters were breaking down, and new approaches were required. This was also the decade of Berkeley, Columbia, and Kent State. "Student power" was even more threatening than "faculty power," at least in theory, because it smacked of anarchy. A confrontation with either faculty or students could mean disruption of the university and an indelible blot on its public reputation.

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20. Minutes, APPAUO, 3 July 1962.

21. Some presidents may have suspected that the University of Toronto secretly hoped to become the University of Ontario. The Robarts Library on the Toronto campus was planned as the research library for the province without much consultation. President Bissell, however, joined in the condemnation of the Spinks report.

It is remarkable that the administrations of Ontario universities escaped any major confrontation either with faculty or students. There were demonstrations and some sit-ins but there were no riots and there was no major destruction of property. No president was forced to resign because he had lost the confidence of the faculty or because the Board of Governors questioned his ability to maintain order. The dangers of confrontation may have been exaggerated; it is often said that Canadians are peaceful and deferential. But some credit should go to the presidents, who had the political wisdom to live with the frustrations and delays of constant consultation and interminable committee meetings, and who presided over major changes in the institutions of university government.

By the end of the decade the university presidents might look back with considerable satisfaction. They had overseen millions of dollars of construction on their campuses with no hint of scandal. Places had been provided for a student body which had trebled in size. The presidents had recruited some eight thousand professors, and had expanded graduate studies to graduate eight thousand PhDs. It had been an unprecedented decade of expansion and yet it was generally agreed that academic standards were even higher than before. The presidents could have taken even greater satisfaction in the dangers that had been avoided. The government had become the paymaster but the universities had maintained an impressive degree of control over admissions, programmes, and staffing. In what had been an extraordinarily turbulent decade throughout the western world, the universities of Ontario had continued to function without any major disruptions. All in all these were no small achievements.

It was also true, however, that these were not the achievements which the presidents at the beginning of the decade had had in mind. The achievements of the 1960s were based on a broad consensus. Governments, professors, and the public generally had favoured expansion in higher education. The presidents had presided over this growth. They had mediated between and among governments, boards, faculty, and students over the expenditure of public funds. In the process the universities had been transformed. But these universities had not been planned. The presidents had had no blueprints and no clear idea of where they were going. The years of expansion had concealed divergences because there had been something for everybody, and even the disappointed could hope for better luck next year. Presidential leadership would be tested more severely in the years of retrenchment.

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Depuis la fin des années soixante, les universités subissent des restrictions budgétaires qu'elles trouvent massive. Cette situation les oblige à faire des choix qui mettent en évidence les divergences entre le gouvernement et les universités sur des questions de fond, tel que le rôle de la recherche. Ce nouvel état crée des tensions entre le gouvernement et les universités, et les recteurs n'ont pas réussi à sortir de cette impasse. Il s'en suit que les deux partis en cause semblent voués à d'interminables frustrations.

Since the 1960s there has been no consensus in Ontario on higher education. The provincial government had achieved its initial objective: enough places had been

provided to meet student demand. It looked forward to capping the costs of universities and spending more money on health and other services. Within the university system it wanted public funds reallocated to respond to the needs of modern technology. Academics, on the other hand, insisted that higher education should not be an instrument of short-term economic planning. They wanted funding for teaching and research, but were convinced that the public interest would be best served if they could decide how the funds were spent. Underlying the debate were divergent views of the nature and purpose of higher education. Until some consensus or compromise could be agreed upon, both governments and academics would be frustrated.

University presidents have been caught in the middle. They have sympathized with the government's concern for retrenchment and its priority for applied research but they have also defended the professors' insistence on academic freedom and the importance of fundamental research. They have not yet succeeded, however, in defining an appropriate balance between fundamental and applied research within the university, a balance which would win the confidence of both the government and the academics. The universities have continued to evolve and the priorities have shifted, but the presidents have not managed to impose a sense of direction.

Much of the controversy has focussed on government funding. The government could control the total expenditures on higher education through formula financing. Each year the presidents, through the Council of Ontario Universities, submitted a brief to the Advisory Committee on University Affairs, requesting a significant increase in the basic income unit to cover higher enrolment, higher salaries, inflation, and new programmes. Each year the advisory committee advised the government to give a smaller increase than was requested. In the 1970s, however, the government cut back even further, and approved increases which were less than the rate of inflation. The university presidents became shriller and shriller in their complaints about the threat to academic standards and the ultimate disaster to which this short-sighted policy was leading. By the end of the decade even the restructured advisory committee shared the gloomy view of the presidents. Its 1979 report, *System on the Brink*, insisted that Ontario universities were seriously underfunded. On the basis of per-student provincial grants, Ontario fell from seventh to last place over the decade.

The government's message was clear. It was convinced that universities could economize by eliminating unnecessary programmes. Surely the province did not need nine doctoral programmes in history? It called on university presidents to rationalize the provincial system. It would respect university autonomy — that is to say it would not decide what programmes should be cut — but until the presidents responded appropriately the government would continue to tighten the purse-strings.

The presidents also believed in rationalization. To them, however, this meant the development of each university according to its distinctive identity. Programmes should only be eliminated if they were not related to the strengths of the institution. The presidents had given the government the impression that their definition of rationalization would reduce programmes and so reduce costs. In 1971 they had set up an Advisory Committee on Academic Planning. ACAP was to assess graduate

programmes across the province, discipline by discipline, and on the basis of these studies the system was to be rationalized voluntarily.

It did not work that way. The ACAP studies varied widely. The report on the discipline of History, for example, was so convinced that history was a good thing that it recommended that every university should have an MA in history and that all the PhD programmes that had been approved or applied for should be confirmed. Other discipline committees were more rigorous but the final results were much the same. When a programme was criticized, the affected university invariably promised to spend more money on equipment or to appoint a leading specialist to bring the programme up to the required standard. Instead of retrenchment, the presidents' definition of rationalization seemed to mean as many or even more programmes.

There was no meeting of minds because there was no agreement on the objectives of the provincial university system. As the presidents explained to the Committee on the Future Role of the Universities in Ontario in 1981: "We suspect that the scepticism about the graduate enterprise has to do with more than cost considerations, that it derives from a lack of understanding of what scholarship and research are, and of why they are crucially important to a society such as ours."<sup>22</sup> The government, on the other hand, felt it understood only too well. Instead of a concern for the economic advantages which could accrue to the province, it saw each university aspiring to win international recognition for excellence and insisting that the government should pay for this fantasy. There is still no meeting of minds. The funding formula has been slightly modified over the years but the basic annual grants continue to fall far short of what universities and even government-appointed commissions have recommended.

More recently the debate has centred on the links with the private sector. The presidents had traditionally seen university research as an activity linked to graduate studies. Research had to be funded because graduate students had to do research and because their supervisors had to keep up with the advances in their discipline. Research was the search for truth, pushing back the frontiers of knowledge. Any practical benefits were fortuitous. By the 1980s, however, it had become a commonplace that research was a major economic weapon in a world in which science and technology could give competitive advantages. When governments became impressed with the benefits of research, the presidents naturally pointed out that much of this research was being done at provincial universities.

It proved to be a double-edged argument. If universities were doing what could be called applied research, it was easy to argue that some areas of research were likely to be of more benefit to the Ontario economy than others. The Herzbergs and the Polanyis might argue that scientific breakthroughs were unpredictable and that scientists should be funded to do what interested them most. Politicians, however, were not interested in paying for Nobel prizes. They wanted to make Ontario's industries more competitive, and that meant financing research in designated fields and encouraging cooperation with the private sector. As the latest report of the presidents' council complains: "The

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22. "Universities and the Future of Ontario: A Foundation on Which to Build," May 1981.

government is prepared to provide greater funds to the universities for certain specific purposes related to its socio-economic goals; however, it seems unprepared to provide an adequate level of base support."<sup>23</sup> In spite of their protests, however, the universities in Ontario are still competing eagerly for whatever research funds the government offers, and are also competing for contributions from the private sector. Universities are still trying to be all things to all men.

Looking back over forty years, the striking feature is the transformation of the institutions of higher learning. The presidents have presided over a surprisingly orderly and peaceful revolution. They may have been more preoccupied with revisions than with visions of what higher education should be. In fairness to them, however, governments and academics have not been much help in defining realistic goals. It is also true that complex institutions in a rapidly changing world are never static. But if muddling through is the best we can hope for, some sense of direction would help. In Ontario the university presidents mediated effectively during a period of expansion. It is not yet certain that they will be able to mediate between the forces, external and internal, which are shaping the universities of today.

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23. Council of Ontario Universities, *Review 1982-83 to 1985-86: Bottoming Out*, 6.